

BAYARD DUCKS HIS PAST

By SEWELL FORD



"You'd most think some remarks was due from her, wouldn't you?"



FIRST place, Swifty Joe should have let the subject drop. Anyway, he needn't have come paradin' into the front office in his gym suit to show me his nutty theory of how Young Diske landed that knockout on the Australian in the breakaway.

"Turn over!" says I. "You're on your back! He couldn't have done anything of the kind."

"Couldn't, eh?" growls Swifty. "Ahr-r-r chee! Couldn't give him the shoulder on the jaw! Ain't I seen it done? Say, lemme show you—"

"Show nothing!" says I. "I'm tellin' you it was a right hook the kid put him out with, from chancery. Now see!"

With that I sheds my coat, gets Swifty's neck in the crook of my left elbow, swings him round for a side hip-lock, and bends his head forward.

"Now, you South Brooklyn kike," I goes on, maybe more realistic than I meant, "I got you right, ain't I? And all I got to do is push in a half-arm jolt like this, and—"

WELL, then I looks up. Neither of us has noticed her come in, hadn't even heard the knob turn; but standin' there in the middle of the room and starin' straight at us is a perfectly good female lady.

That don't half tell it, either. She's all lady, from the tips of her double-A pumps to the little gray wing peekin' over the top of her dinky gray bonnet,—one of these slim, dainty, graceful built parties, with white, lacy stuff at her wrists and throat, and the rest of her costume all gray: not the puckered-waist, half-masted skirt effects all the women are wearin' now. I can't say what year's model it was, or how far back; but it's a style that seems just fitted to her: maybe one that she's invented herself. Around thirty-five, I should judge she was, from the little streak of gray runnin' through her front hair.

What got me, though, was the calm, remote, superior look that she's givin' us. She don't seem nervous or panicky at all, like most women would, breakin' in on a rough-house scene like that. She don't even stare reprovin'; but stands there watchin' us as serene as if we wa'n't anything more'n pictures on a movie sheet. And there we was, holdin' the pose; me with my right all bunched for action, and Swifty with his face to the mat. Seemed minutes we was clinched there, and everything so still you could hear Swifty's heavy breathin' all over the room.

Course I was waitin' for some remarks from her. You'd most think they was due, wouldn't you? It's my private office, remember, and she's sort of crashed in unannounced. If any explainin' was done, it was up to her to start it. And waitin' for what don't come is apt to get on your nerves.

"Eh?" I throws over my shoulder at her.

Her straight eyebrows kind of humps in the middle—that's all.

"Did you say anything?" I goes on.

"No," says she. If she'd smiled sort of faint, or even glared stern at us, it wouldn't have been so bad. But she just presses her lips together—thin, narrow-gage

lips, they was—and goes on givin' us that distant, unconcerned look.

Meanwhile Swifty, with his face bent towards the floor, ain't gettin' any view at all, and is only guessin' what's happenin'. He squirms impatient.

"Say, Shorty," he grumbles, "I got a few bones in me neck, remember. Break, can't you?"

And as I loosens my hold he straightens up, only to get the full benefit of that placid, lady-like lookover.

"Ahr-r-r chee!" says he, glancin' disgusted at me. Then he starts gettin' rosy in the ears, like he always does when there's fluffs around, and after one more hasty look he bolts back into the gym.

THE strange lady watches this move like she has everything else, only she shrugs her shoulders a bit. What she meant by that I couldn't make out. I was gettin' to the point where I didn't care so much, either.

"Well, Ma'am?" says I.

"Poor fellow!" says she. "I am glad he escaped that brutal blow."

"Are you?" says I. "Well, don't waste too much sympathy on him; for I was only demonstratin' how—" "You might offer me a chair," she breaks in sort of casual.

"Why—er—sure!" says I, and before I knew it I was jumpin' to drag one up.

She settles into it without even a nod of thanks.

"You see," I goes on, "he's my assistant, and I was tryin' to show him how—"

"It's rather stuffy here," observes the lady. "Couldn't you open a window?"

It's more an order than anything else; but I hops over and shoves the sash wide open.

"That's too much," says she. "It causes a draft."

So I shuts it halfway. Then I gets her a glass of water. "Anything else you'd like?" says I, tryin' to be sarcastic. "The mornin' paper, or—"

"Where is Mr. Steele?" she demands.

"Oh!" says I, gettin' a little light on the mystery. "J. Bayard, you mean?"

"Of course," says she. "He was not at his hotel, and as this was the other address I was given I expected to find him here."

"Huh!" says I. "Gave you this number, did he? Well, you see, this is my Physical Culture Studio, and while he's apt to be here off and on, it ain't his—"

"Just such a place as I might have anticipated findin' Bayard in," says she, glancin' around the front office at the portraits in ring costume and so on. "Quite!"

"Let's see," says I, "you are—er—"

"I am Mrs. Lee Hollister," says she, "of Richmond, Virginyah."

"I might have suspicioned that last," says I, "by the way you—"

But she don't give me a show to register any little slam I might have thought of puttin' over. She's the kind that conducts a conversation accordin' to her own rules, and she never hesitates to cut in.

"I want to know what there is about this will of Mr. Gordon's," she demands. "Some absurd legacy, I presume; at least, my solicitor, Colonel Henderson,

seemed to think so. I suppose you've heard of Colonel Britt Henderson?"

"Not a whisper," says I as defiant as I know how.

She expresses her opinion of such ignorance with a little lift of her pointed chin. "Colonel Henderson," she goes on, "is perhaps the ablest and most brilliant attorney in Virginyah. He is connected with the best families in the State."

"Never heard of anybody from down there that wa'n't," says I. "And while I ain't disputin' him, mind you, his guess about this bein' a legacy is—"

"Will Mr. Steele be in soon?" she asks crisp.

"Might," says I, "and then again he mightn't."

"It's rather rude of him to keep me waiting," says she.

"Maybe if you'd sent word ahead," I suggests, "he'd been on hand. But now you've come all this way—"

"You don't suppose," breaks in Mrs. Hollister, "that I came north just for that? Not at all. It was to select a design for the memorial window I am having placed in our church, in memory of poor, dear Professor Hollister. My late husband, you know: and a most noble, talented, courtly gentleman he was too."

"Ye-e-es'm," says I.

"What are those objects on the wall?" says she, shiftin' sudden.

"Boxin' gloves, Ma'am," says I. "That's the pair of mits that won me the championship, back in—"

"Has Mr. Steele become a pugilist too?" she asks.

"Not so you'd notice it," says I.

"Hm-m-m-m!" says she, tappin' the toe of one of her pumps and gazin' around critical.

Not that she takes any notice of me. Honest, if I'd been a yellow pup tied in the corner, she couldn't have been more offhand. I was gettin' warm in the neck by the minute too, and in three more shakes I'd been cuttin' loose with the acid remarks, when the door opens and in blows J. Bayard Steele. I sighs relieved when I sees him too.

OH! says he, gettin' a back view of her. "I beg pardon. I—er—" Then she turns and faces him. "Alice!" he gasps.

"My dear Bayard!" she protests. "Please let's not have any scene. It was all so long ago, and I'm sure you must have gotten over that."

"But how—why—er—" he goes on.

"You wrote to Mrs. Lee Hollister, didn't you?" she demands. "I am Mrs. Hollister."

Another gasp from Steele. "You?" says he. "Then you—you—"

"To be sure I married," says she. "And Professor Hollister was one of the truest, noblest Southern gentlemen who ever lived. I have mourned his loss for nearly ten years, and— But don't stand there twiddling your hat in that absurd fashion! You may sit, if you like. Get Mr. Steele a chair, will you?"

I'd jumped and done it too, before I had time to think.

"Now what is this about Mr. Gordon's will?" says she. Well, between us, whenever she'd let us get in a word, we managed to sketch out the idea.

"You see," says Steele, "Pyramid Gordon wished to

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